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ABSTRACT

Selected findings of a recent national study of participants in a televised college-credit drama course (Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama) are reported. Information was obtained through 24 institutions offering the course; through questionnaires administered to samples of students, faculty members, and administrators; and through site visits by researchers. Among the findings were: (1) average age of students taking the Classic Theatre course was 36 years; (2) 75% of the students were females; (3) 20% had completed one year of college, while 22% had completed two years of college; (4) 72% had never previously taken a drama or literature course; (5) 74% of the students were employed full-time, and 18% were employed part-time; (6) 18% were housewives; (7) 11% reported that they were students; (8) 43% were simultaneously enrolled in on-campus courses; (9) 21.5% were taking other television courses at the same time; (10) over half of the participants reported satisfaction with the broadcast schedule; and (11) half of the students rated the televised course as being equally as difficult as a regular college course. Results of the study confirm the tremendous potential of high-quality television courses in providing a visual experience that no one local institution could hope to duplicate. (JDS)

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WHO TAKES NATIONAL TV COURSES?

TO BE PRESENTED AT THE NAEB CONFERENCE

Chicago, October 27, 1976

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Educators and broadcasters across the country have been interested in answers to questions about who take the national television courses such as Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama, The Adams Chronicles, and The Ascent of Man. Are the students the same as on-campus learners? Do they vary from course to course and region to region? Are there optimum broadcasting times? Do the students need and want repeats of programs and local broadcasting supplements? What kind of campus services such as meetings with the faculty and other students do these students want and need? How can colleges and stations cooperate to inform potential students of this new educational venture?

Answers to these and many other questions of the same type would help us all to better plan and serve this newly-emerging group. But so far the picture we have of these people is spotty. We have had only a few local studies asking limited questions. We need more national studies, more pulling together of diverse local patterns for analysis and, finally, more in-depth studies of these students and their response to the college-level courses built around a major national public television series. Today I'll report some findings of one recent national study of the college credit course offered around "Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama".

JE 760 686

CLASSIC THEATRE RESEARCH STUDY

Staff members at the Coast Community College District in California and the University of California at San Diego, Extension Division, are presently completing this study. Its focus was on the students, teachers and administrators who were connected with the course. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the study was conducted during the winter and spring of 1976, following the first showing of the series. While it was not a terribly large or well-funded research project, we sought to uncover the basic profile of the students taking this course and gain a better understanding of the types of courses that were set up by colleges and universities across the country.

We used several devices for collecting information. First we sent out a questionnaire to all institutions that offered the course. There was a 50% response rate to this mailing. Second, we designed specific questionnaires for samples of students, faculty members and administrators. Finally, we conducted site visits at seven schools across the country. The site visits helped us to uncover the tremendous diversity in the types of courses offered, something we would not have had a feeling for if we had relied on the questionnaire alone. Unfortunately, we were not able to investigate the arrangements and reactions of PBS stations to the course.

We can only give you a summary of the results of this project today. I will touch on some of our conclusions about the type of students who chose to enroll in the course and their reactions to the content and TV component. Arch McPhail, who is next to me here

on the panel, will be reporting other findings from this same study which focus on the responses of faculty facilitators and administrators to the course materials and to television instruction. I might also add that a monograph reporting the results of this study will be available in December. We will be making a formal announcement on that soon and it will be available for you to request from either the University of California at San Diego or from Coast Community College District.

BASIC DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDENT SAMPLE

Generalizations based on the data from this project must be understood in light of the project limitations. Our information on students came from 558 questionnaires filled out by a non-representative sample of individuals enrolled in 24 colleges and universities across the country. (We mailed out 1,700 questionnaires to all students taking the courses in those institutions and felt a 30% response rate three months after the course had ended was fairly good.) Of the 558, roughly three in five were students in the fourteen two-year colleges and the others from the ten four-year institutions on which we chose to focus our in-depth study.

I said the student sample was not systematically representative nor random, but our choice of the institutions was explicit and was the primary influence on the student sample. We were interested in "successful" courses and student reactions to their arrangements, so we chose schools which had well-planned courses with 25 or more students enrolled. We also wanted to uncover course differences related to institutional, size, type, control and geographic location (urban and rural).

Were our 24 schools (out of over 200 which offered a credit course) atypical? Some were: Chicago Inner-City Institute, University of Hawaii and Miami-Dade Community College have extensive experience and resources for offering extension and television courses. But University of Minnesota Technical College, Imperial Valley College, and Bunker Hill Community College (Massachusetts) and others had never done this kind of thing before and they were experimenting. Students may or may not be representative of the 12-15,000 who took it nationwide, but do tell us something about the more typical course.

It should be noted here that nationwide somewhat over 5,500 students took a course in the Classic Theatre: The Humanities in Drama, from a two-year institution. Furthermore, based on book sales around the country, we have estimated that about 10,000 students total took some kind of college level course for credit around this television series. It's very difficult to get exact figures because of differing reporting procedures at higher education institutions.

It also should be noted that most of the 558 questionnaires that were returned were from students who had completed the course. Among the respondents, 88% indicated that they had finished the course. This is an important bias to keep in mind since those who were able to complete the course most likely found it interesting, not too difficult, and offered at a time that was convenient for their viewing. In future research projects, we should try to identify students or potential students who chose not to enroll or who dropped out partway through the course to find out their reasons for not enrolling or dropping out. Now we can only speculate about the student who could have been but wasn't served by this course.

One other note about our findings: I'll speak in generalities, but the total figures, in terms of averages and percents, hide some wide variations in the data from campus to campus. For example, previous public TV viewing habits varied widely and I suspect in part because of the degree of success of local public stations in penetrating mass audiences. We are aware of some of these variations. We did, however, find very little difference between the responses of students in two- and four-year institutions. Their basic age-sex-education levels and rating of the course components were very similar.

WHO WERE THE VIEWERS? A PROFILE

Based on the information from our questionnaire, we were able to determine some general characteristics of the students taking the Classic Theatre course. The average age of students in both two- and four-year institutions was 36 years. Also, 3/4 of the students both in two- and four-year institutions were female, much higher than the proportion of women taking other television courses. Local studies of students in TV courses have shown anywhere from 10 to 55% of the students being women.

Our findings on students' ages, however, corresponds much more closely to the results of other studies. In a Coast Community College District study of 800 students taking five TV courses in 1973-74, 42% of the students were between the ages of 26 and 35. And of the students taking The Adams Chronicles last spring in the Southern California TV consortium, almost 90% were between the ages of

23 and 45. It seems very clear that television courses do, in fact, attract an older student than the under-20 or as in community college, mid-20's student so often found in on-campus courses.

Virtually all of the respondents to the Classic Theatre student survey had completed some college courses. Overall, 1/5th of the respondents had completed one year of college, and an additional 22% had completed two years of college. It is rather interesting to note that even among the students who enrolled in two-year institutions, nearly a quarter (23%) had already completed more than four years of college training. Nearly half (48%) of the students in four-year institutions had completed more than four years of college training. These data suggest that students undertaking and completing television courses are experienced course-takers. This course produced a change in the usual sequence of college attendance: two-year, then four-year, then graduate school.

While we found that the students were college educated, they were not, as we had expected, students familiar with the subject matter. Seventy-two percent of the respondents said that they had never taken a drama or literature course before the fall of 1975. Many indicated that they were curious about humanities courses and saw this as an opportunity to experiment in the subject matter without taking the risks that might be involved in an on-campus course.

We also have some information on the educational aspirations of the students responding to this questionnaire. Of those who wanted further education, most were aiming high. Only 8% of the total 558 respondents wanted the A.A. degree, but 32% wanted Bachelors, and 27% wanted Masters degrees. It should also be noted, however, that

almost 1/4 of the respondents did not take the course to gain credits toward a degree but rather enrolled almost purely for personal enrichment purposes or for career advancement. We found that among all respondents, over half did take the course for personal enrichment regardless of whatever other category they had marked. Many of the respondents checked "all of the above" when asked their reasons for taking the course: personal pleasure, credits, convenience, and career advancement.

Rather than just looking at statistics, it is perhaps most interesting to look at some of the detailed answers that the students wrote regarding their reasons for enrolling in the Classic Theatre course. Here's a few examples:

"G.I. Bill"

"It was available after I dropped a course I found unsuitable."

"Toward renewing my elementary teaching certificate"

"Love theatre"

"Curiosity"

"If I took it I didn't have to take Humanities 101"

"Complete pre-medical requirements"

"Previous lack of exposure to this field -- for broader education."

"After many years of 'hard sciences', a need for humanities studies"

"To test aptitude for college study"

Most of the personal comments will warm the heart of any educator working in an extension division or teaching correspondence courses and they seem to verify the fact that convenience of television courses is definitely a factor in enrolling in this type of educational experiment.

Most of the students enrolled were employed. Overall, 74% of the students were employed full-time and an additional 18% were employed part-time. One hundred and one, or 18%, of the respondents also classified themselves as housewives and 60, or 11%, said they were students. Contrary to some expectations that a large percentage of students taking the Classic Theatre course would be older, only 12, or 2% of this particular sample, were retired persons. Of the persons who were employed, the largest percentage were in education, over a quarter were teachers in elementary, secondary, or at the community college level.

These data don't convey much of the human dimensions of the respondents. There was, for example, an 88-year old woman who took the course through her local community college -- and loved it! Or the 40 students in the Chicago Inner City Institute course who were incarcerated in a city prison.

Finally, it's rather interesting to consider whether they were also enrolled in other courses at the same time they were taking Classic Theatre. Forty-three percent were enrolled simultaneously in on-campus courses and 21.5% said they were taking other TV courses at the same time they took the Classic Theatre television course. It is interesting to compare these figures with the response to the Southern California TV consortium survey of its students in the spring of 1976. They found that 8 in 10 were currently enrolled in other courses on campus.

Thus, we get the impression that students who took this course, while not full-time enrolled in college-level courses or in

residence on a college campus, nonetheless, are people who are involved in formal education on a regular basis either in preparation for getting a degree sometime in the future or for personal enrichment. Higher education has value to them and they respond to the opportunity to get credit and enjoy learning combined with good television.

WHAT WAS THE STUDENT OVERALL RESPONSE TO THE COURSE

While it is necessary to once again remind ourselves that this was a biased sample, I don't think we can ignore the high degree of enthusiasm for television courses and for the Classic Theatre course recorded by the respondents to our Student Questionnaire. They liked the broadcast of the plays, they liked the books, they liked the convenience, they liked the independence from a college campus, and they liked the services, almost whatever they were, provided by the local college in which they were enrolled. While there were many opportunities given for students to indicate criticism of the course, overall few criticisms were recorded.

Let me just give a sample of the responses of the students to different course components. Regarding the broadcast schedule of the plays, including repeat viewing times, over half of the students (58%) indicated that the broadcast schedule was convenient and an additional 1/3 (33%) said that the broadcast schedule was convenient some of the time. Eighty-five percent of all the respondents indicated that the pace of the course -- broadcasting one new play each week -- was satisfactory. However, 10% of the two-year students did indicate that they found the course too fast. Students were asked to compare

the Classic Theatre course to other college courses that they had taken. Twenty-six percent found it more difficult, 19% found it less difficult, and 50% of the students rated it about the same. Again, though, we should pay attention to the significant minority (about 1 in 4) who rated the course as more difficult than other college courses they had taken.

Students were amazingly persistent in watching this course. (Remember, the plays plus previews lasted from 2 to 3 hours, plus repeats. And began at 8:30 p.m. on a week night.) The average number of plays viewed by our respondents was very close to 12 and they watched 10 of the 13 previews for the series. A third of the students also refused to rank the value of the various course components, marking "all of the above" when asked to rate which of the components were the most helpful. Over 3/4 rated the support books, the study guide and book of readings, as being helpful for them in reaching course goals. Maybe their persistence and use of all course components helped them to complete the course.

Finally, we asked the students to compare the Classic Theatre course with on-campus courses. About one in three said that they missed the feedback and interaction they found with an on-campus course. On the other hand, almost two in three indicated that "independent televised instruction was suited to my needs". Of course, these are not mutually exclusive responses. Students can miss the personal feedback while also appreciating the convenience and independence of a correspondence course. In other words, I think we see here among the students who responded to the questionnaire -- those who completed the course -- that they are satisfied and in fact desire the flexibility and convenience of studying independently in their home

without having to go to a campus regularly.

On the other hand, I don't think we should lose sight of the fact that, for many students, this course was too difficult and that there were not enough services or supports provided on the campus for them to successfully handle the material. This conclusion is based on some administrative and teacher impressions. Several of the two-year college faculty members indicated that one of the major reasons for dropping out of this course was that there was too much reading and it was far too difficult for the average student to handle. And the faculty member at Illinois State University at Normal indicated that freshman level students who had not yet taken an English composition course on campus were not able to handle the Classic Theatre course as he designed it because of the extensive amount of writing and critical analysis he required. In other words, I don't think we can pat ourselves on the back because some students are able to successfully complete a course such as the Classic Theatre. I am sure there was a sizeable number of more students who could have profited from a faculty member or the encouragement of regular sessions with other students. The questions are how we can change the design of these courses in the future to help, and, perhaps more importantly, how can the local campuses implement the course in such a way to identify students needing help and provide arrangements to help.

STUDENTS RESPONSE TO TELEVISION

I know that those of you from the PBS system in the audience will be interested to know whether offering a college level course around a series succeeds in attracting some new viewers to public

television. I think the answer is both yes and no. On one hand we have an indication that 90% of the students had watched public television stations before enrolling in the Classic Theatre television course, and of those, 58% said they had watched it frequently. Putting it in reverse, 50% had not watched PBS frequently. There is some indication that as a result of watching this course, the students will watch public television more frequently and on a more regular basis. Two-thirds to 3/4 of all the students responding to the questionnaire indicated that the course had changed their TV viewing, reading and entertainment habits. Among the comments received in answer to this question were the following:

"For the first time I watched regularly"

"Now I watch mostly educational TV on Channel 24"

"More frequent TV watching"

"Because the broadcasts were so good, I find it hard to enjoy broadcasts of lower quality."

There was also some indication that though the students had watched public television before, this course led them to be aware of more of the diversity of programming available on public television stations. From only being aware of Sesame Street or Wall Street Week, they learned about the existence of cultural affairs programs. I should also note that there was quite a difference regionally in the response to the question of the previous TV viewing habits. It is clear that in some urban areas of the country this course did succeed in attracting a whole new audience to the local public television station. In other areas, where the public television station had been handling

broadcast courses for some time, a rather small percentage of the sample indicated that they were new to public television or new to TV courses. However, overall 71% of the students said that the Classic Theatre was their first TV course.

IMPACT OF THE COURSE ON STUDENTS

In general, most of the students who responded to this questionnaire not only indicated that they would take another television course again if offered, and 8 in 10 said they would take another course in the subject matter whether televised or on campus in the future if possible. Furthermore, 89% of them said that they would recommend the course to their family or friends if it were offered again. Asked whether they would take another TV course, overall 87.5% answered yes, with 95% of the four-year students indicating that they would take another television course again. Occasionally we saw reports that they were going to watch TV less and go back to reading more. Many also indicated that they would be more alert to local dramatic productions available as well as becoming less satisfied with normal commercial television fare.

CONCLUSIONS

Did the course do what it was supposed to do? i.e. introduce a wide new audience to theatre and drama? Based on student profiles, not really. True, we know that the students sampled were new to the subject, but also we know that they aren't our typical on-campus lower division student, many of whom have difficulty in reading,

writing, and ability to pace their studying without supervision. We also have much feedback that the selection of plays was too esoteric, the previews while scholarly, were not produced in such a way as to answer introductory questions, and there was too much reading required, some at too advanced a level.

On the positive side, students who could handle the work and were independently motivated enjoyed the course, found the materials relevant, and appreciated the convenience.

The response by both the students and the faculty members to this course has confirmed once again the tremendous potential for exciting education in making courses around high-quality series, such as Classic Theatre. Almost all educators involved agree that these courses provide a visual experience that no one local institution could hope to duplicate.

Responsibility may rest primarily on the educational institutions for providing the additional services, information and literature that make the difference as to whether the students receive credit for watching the shows.

TWO- AND FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS STUDIED IN DEPTH

CLASSIC THEATRE: THE HUMANITIES IN DRAMA

TWO-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

Bunker Hill Community College (Massachusetts)

Central Piedmont Community College (North Carolina)

Chicago Inner-City Institute

Hillsborough Community College (Florida)

Imperial Valley Community College (California)

Kingsborough Community College (New York)

Lansing Community College (Michigan)

Maricopa County Community College (Arizona)

Merritt College (California)

Miami-Dade Community College (Florida)

Nassau Community College (New York)

North Virginia Community College

Rio Hondo College (California)

University of Minnesota Technical College

FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

Arizona State University

Illinois State University at Normal

Pepperdine University (California)

Southern Connecticut State College

University of California at Davis

University of Hawaii

University of Minnesota

University of North Florida

University of Virginia

West Liberty State (West Virginia)

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